



Gang Involvement Among San Diego County Arrestees in 2008

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Cynthia Burke, Ph.D.
Division Director



401 B Street
Suite 800
San Diego, CA 92101
(619) 699-1900

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GANG INVOLVEMENT AMONG SAN DIEGO COUNTY ARRESTEES IN 2008

PROJECT OVERVIEW

This SANDAG CJ Bulletin is the third in a series¹ highlighting findings from data collected as part of the Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program. As part of this project, adult and juvenile arrestees are approached within 48 hours of their arrest (and booking) to conduct an interview regarding their drug use and other recent behaviors. Since 2004, when federal funding for the Arrestee Drug Abuse Monitoring (ADAM) program was suspended, San Diego has been the only site to continue this project uninterrupted. In 2008, this data collection effort was generously supported by the California Border Alliance Group (CBAG), County of San Diego Alcohol and Drug Services (ADS), the District Attorney's Office, and the Public Safety Group. Their support, as well as the support of the region's local jurisdictions through the Criminal Justice Clearinghouse and cooperation of the San Diego County Sheriff's and Probation Departments, is gratefully acknowledged.

According to the most recent National Youth Gang Survey (Egley & O'Donnell, 2009), a steady resurgence of gang problems has occurred in many jurisdictions in recent years. In San Diego County, current estimates are that the region is home to 147 different gangs with over 7,000 members (San Diego Police Department, 2009) and that almost one in three (31%) homicides in 2008 in which motive could be determined were related to gangs (SANDAG, 2009). For the first time in 2008, arrestees who reported any gang affiliation², either in the past (ever for juveniles, five years for adults) or currently, were asked to complete an addendum regarding their

¹ The first and second bulletins, summarizing results of juvenile and adult interviews, were released earlier in 2009. The fourth bulletin, with information from a methamphetamine addendum, will also be released in 2009.

² A specific definition was not given to arrestees regarding how gang affiliation was defined, allowing the individuals being interviewed to decide for themselves how they should be categorized. However, interviewers were instructed to include individuals who identified themselves as "skinheads" or "taggers" if asked.

BULLETIN HIGHLIGHTS

- While gang membership for this sample of arrestees started as early as age 6 and as late as 23, the average age it started was 13.
- Male arrestees were more likely than females to report being gang members and having gang conditions as part of their probation supervision, rather than just associating with a gang.
- Juvenile arrestees were more likely to report that they were still a member of a gang or associating with one, while adult arrestees were more likely to say this relationship was in the past.
- Over half of these arrestees reported that other family members were also in a gang, but not necessarily the same one.
- Juveniles who were affiliated with a gang reported doing so because of their peer group as well as the protection they perceive it provides.
- While gang members report participating in both legal and illegal activities with other members, almost all said their involvement in criminal activity increased after joining.
- Half of these gang-affiliated arrestees report having carried a gun and most report it was easy to obtain.
- More than two-thirds of those interviewed envisioned that at some point they would end their affiliation with the gang.
- Gang-affiliated arrestees differed from those who did not report gang affiliation on a number of dimensions, including drug use histories and contact with the justice system.

involvement with the gang, including how it started, how it related to involvement in illegal activity, and any desire they had to leave the

gang. This research bulletin presents this information, including analyses by arrestee age (adult or juvenile sample) and gender.

How Many Arrestees Report Having a Gang Affiliation?

During 2008, 520 adult males, 270 adult females, 123 juvenile males, and 41 juvenile females were interviewed as part of the SAM program. Of these individuals, juvenile males and females were most likely to report some type of gang affiliation (46% of each group), compared to 14 percent of adult females and 13 percent of adult males. Of these 184 adult and juvenile arrestees who admitted some type of gang affiliation during the regular SAM interview, 154 (84%) agreed to take the additional time to complete the gang addendum.³

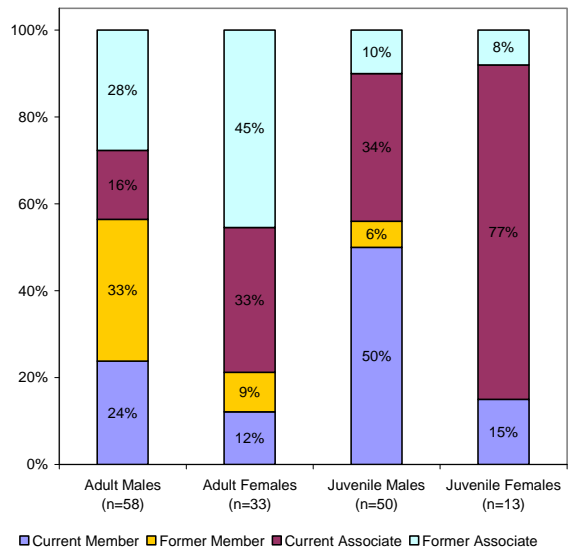
What Is the Nature of the Gang Affiliation for These Arrestees?

At the beginning of the gang addendum, interviewees were asked to describe if they were a current or former member, or a current or former associate. As Figure 1 shows, males (both adult and juvenile) were significantly more likely to report being members of a gang (57% of adults and 56% of juveniles, with “current” and “former” combined), while females were more likely to report they were associates (78% and 85%, respectively). In addition, juveniles (both males and females) were more likely to report current involvement (either membership or association) (86%), compared to adults (42%).

In terms of this affiliation being known by the juvenile or adult criminal justice system, around half reported that they were a documented gang member (45%) and that they had gang conditions as part of their probation orders (55%). In addition, just over one-third (36%) said they had been under the supervision of the Probation Department’s gang suppression unit. Males were significantly more likely than females to report

each of these gang-related supervision requirements, including being documented (56% versus 18%), having gang conditions (64% versus 22%), and being supervised by the gang suppression unit (46% versus 7%) (not shown).

Figure 1
MALES MORE LIKELY TO REPORT GANG MEMBERSHIP THAN FEMALES



NOTE: Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.
SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

How Many of These Individuals Have Family Members in Gangs?

Around half (53%) of these arrestees with a gang affiliation reported that other family members were also in a gang, with over three-quarters (78%) of these reporting that this involvement was current. When asked if these relatives were in the same or a different gang, 22 percent said they were all in the same gang, 48 percent said that some were in the same gang, and 30 percent that they were all in a different gang. When asked to describe how they were related to these other individuals, the most common response included cousins and siblings (Table 1). “Other” relatives include aunts, uncles, nephews, nieces, and blended family members.

³ Those who completed the gang addendum did not differ significantly from those who did not (but reported a gang affiliation on the SAM interview) in terms of their gender, race/ethnicity, age, or current highest arrest charge.

Table 1
ARRESTEES MOST LIKELY
TO REPORT COUSINS AND SIBLINGS
ARE ALSO IN A GANG

| | |
|--------------|-----------|
| Cousin | 60% |
| Sibling | 40% |
| Other | 36% |
| Father | 18% |
| Mother | 10% |
| TOTAL | 80 |

NOTE: Percentages based on multiple responses.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

How Did Gang Affiliation Begin for These Individuals?

When the 74 arrestees who reported membership (either in the past or currently) were asked how old they were when they first began associating with the gang, the mean age was 13.3 (*SD* = 2.7, range 6 to 23), with no difference by gender (not shown). When asked their motivation for becoming a gang member or associating with the gang, the most common reason given was that their friends also did (58%), followed by that it provided a network of belonging/peers for them (47%). In addition, around one in three (32%) noted that their family members were involved with the gang. These findings of involvement being related to family and friend relations are consistent with cross-site longitudinal research conducted by Thornberry and his colleagues. In addition, juveniles were significantly more likely than adults to report their affiliation began because their friends were in the gang (71% versus 49%, respectively) and that they were looking for a sense of belonging (57% versus 40%, respectively) (not shown).

When asked specifically about whether their gang offered protection, two-thirds (68%) reported that it did, with juveniles significantly more likely to feel this was offered (84%) than adults (57%). When these 104 individuals were asked who was offered protection, 82 percent said themselves, 68 percent their neighborhood, and 43 percent their family (not shown).

Table 2
PEERS CITED AS TOP REASON FOR BEGINNING
GANG INVOLVEMENT

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------|
| Friends are members/associates | 58% |
| Give sense of belonging | 47% |
| Family are members/associates | 32% |
| Drug dealing/making money | 10% |
| Provides status | 10% |
| Provides protection | 8% |
| Forced/coerced | 1% |
| TOTAL | 154 |

NOTE: Percentages based on multiple responses.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

When asked what individuals have to do to become a member of the gang, the most common method was being “jumped in” or fighting with someone else in the gang (77%), with others describing initiation as involving fighting someone else in another gang (19%), committing illegal acts other than stealing (8%), theft (5%), or other actions (20%) (that vary from member to member and often relate to proving one’s self and dedication to the gang) (not shown).

What Types of Activities Do These Individuals Report Engaging in With the Gang?

Arrestees who reported some type of current or past gang affiliation were asked whether they engaged in specific legal and illegal activities regularly with their friends/peers in the gang. As Table 3 shows, almost all (98%) said that they hung out, with 89 percent saying they got high or drunk, 80 percent that they “cruised around,” and 78 percent that they got in fights. Around one-third to two-thirds also reported participating in a variety of illegal acts with their gang, including fighting and stealing. There were some differences by age and gender in these self-reported activities, with juveniles (68%) significantly more likely to report tagging/graffiti than adults (48%); adults (49%) more likely to

report stealing cars than juveniles (24%); and males (43%) more likely to report vandalism than females (13%) (not shown).

Table 3
GANG-INVOLVED ARRESTEES
REPORT PARTICIPATING IN BOTH
CRIMINAL AND NON-CRIMINAL
ACTIVITIES

| | |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Hang out | 98% |
| Get high/drunk | 89% |
| Cruise | 80% |
| Get in fights | 78% |
| Theft | 61% |
| Graffiti | 56% |
| Robbery | 48% |
| Motor vehicle theft | 39% |
| Vandalism | 34% |
| Other | 10% |
| TOTAL | 152-153 |

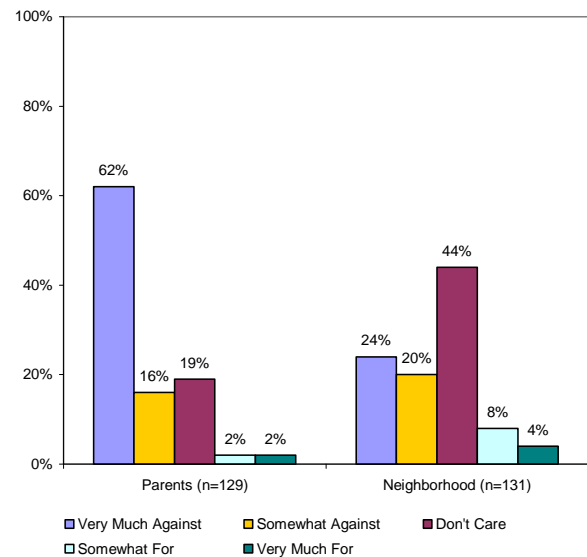
NOTE: Cases with missing information not included. Percentages based on multiple responses.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

What Social Factors do These Individuals Perceive are Related to Gang Affiliation?

While almost two-thirds (62%) of those interviewed said that their parents were “very much against” their involvement with the gang, only one in four felt the same negative view was shared by other residents in their neighborhood (Figure 2). Rather, the most common response when asked how members of their neighborhood felt about their gang affiliation was they “don’t care” (44%). This finding is of interest because research examining risk factors for gang membership has found that neighborhood characteristics may exert influence indirectly through overall disorganization, lack of resources, and the inhibition of prosocial bonds (Howell & Egley, 2005). The only significant difference by age or gender was in terms of the perception of parents’ reactions, with females significantly less likely to say their parents were “very much against” the affiliation (45%), compared to males (69%) (not shown).

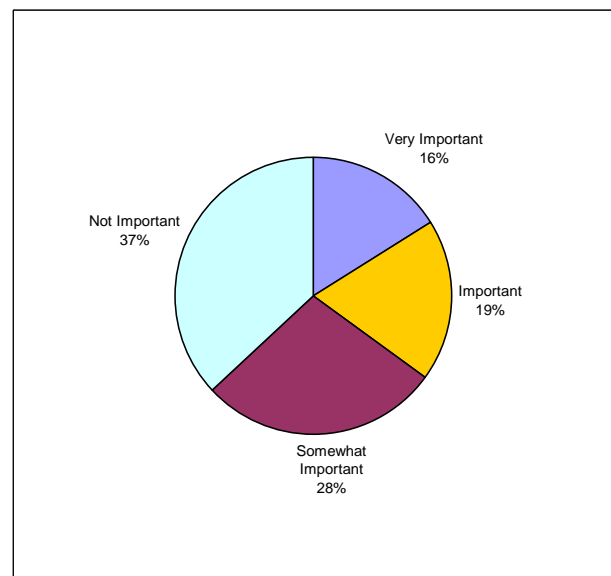
Figure 2
MOST ARRESTEES SAY PARENTS CARE ABOUT
THEIR GANG INVOLVEMENT BUT
NEIGHBORHOOD DOES NOT



NOTE: Cases with missing information not included. Percentages may not equal 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

Figure 3
ARRESTEES DIFFER REGARDING HOW
IMPORTANT GANG MEMBERSHIP IS FOR
YOUTH IN THEIR NEIGHBORHOOD



TOTAL = 127

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

Related to neighborhood reaction to gang involvement, respondents also offered different views about how important gang membership was for youth in their neighborhood, with some feeling it was “very important” or “important” (35% combined), and others saying it was “somewhat important” (28%) or “not important” (37%) (Figure 3).

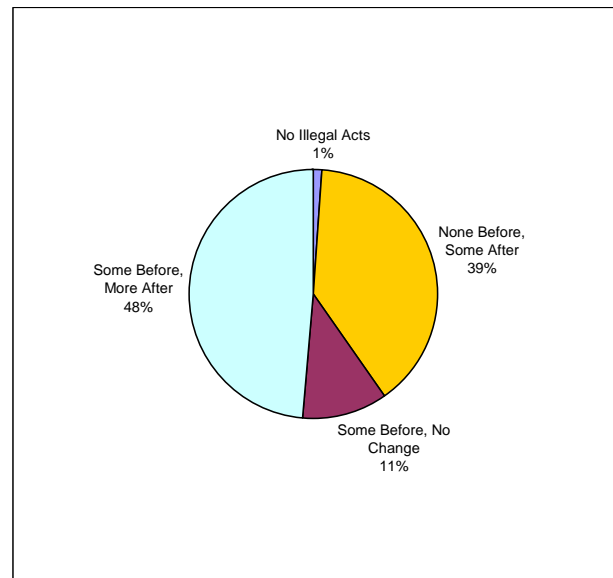
How Involved are Gang Members in Illegal Activity Before and After Affiliation Begins?

According to leading researchers such as Maxson and Klein (2009), one of the most enduring findings in the field is that youth who join gangs commit more crime than those who do not and that gang members also commit a variety of different illegal acts (i.e., they are generalists rather than specialists). As such, gang members were asked if they had committed illegal acts prior to joining the gang, as well as if they had begun to commit acts or if the frequency of these acts had increased. As Figure 4 shows, almost half (48%) answered affirmatively to both questions – they committed illegal acts before joining the gang and the frequency of these acts increased after joining. In addition, over one-third (39%) reported not committing illegal acts prior to joining the gang but doing so after becoming a member, 11 percent said they committed illegal acts before and after joining with no change in frequency, and only 1 percent said committing illegal acts was never an issue.

As Table 4 shows, for the 34 youth who reported engaging in illegal activity before joining the gang, as well as an increase after doing so, the acts that appeared to increase the most included motor vehicle theft (38% versus 56%), dealing drugs (35% versus 53%), and robbery (38% versus 53%). There was no difference in the frequency of these self-reported acts between those who reported committing them before joining the gang and those who did not. When all of the gang members were asked who they were with “mostly” when committing these illegal acts (after becoming a gang member), 62 percent said they

did so with fellow gang members, 32 percent alone, and 6 percent with non-gang individuals (not shown).

Figure 4
MOST GANG MEMBERS REPORT COMMITTING SOME CRIME BEFORE MEMBERSHIP, AS WELL AS AN INCREASE AFTER JOINING



TOTAL = 71

NOTE: Percentages do not equal 100 due to rounding.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

Table 4
ILLEGAL ACTS INCREASE AFTER GANG MEMBERSHIP

| | Before | After |
|---------------------|--------|--------------|
| Fights | 74% | 79% |
| Getting drunk/high | 68% | 71% |
| Theft | 59% | 64% |
| Graffiti/tagging | 53% | 59% |
| Vandalism | 56% | 59% |
| Motor vehicle theft | 38% | 56% |
| Dealing drugs | 35% | 53% |
| Robbery | 38% | 53% |
| TOTAL | | 32-34 |

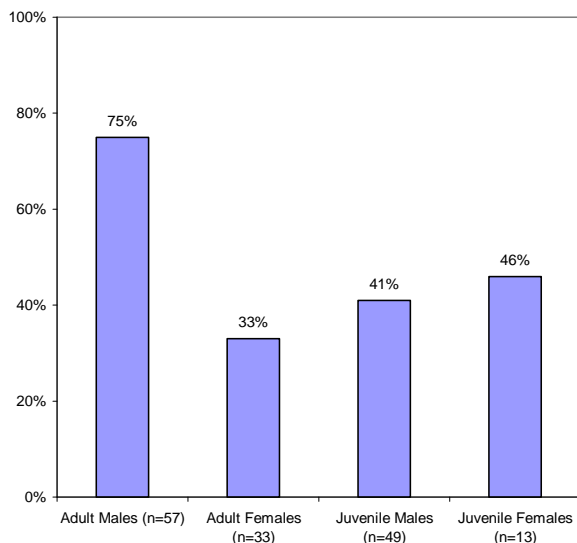
NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

How Many of These Gang-Involved Arrestees Have Carried a Gun?

Previous research has shown that gang members are more likely than other similar aged offenders to carry guns (Lizotte et al., 2000). Overall, about half (53%) of the gang-affiliated arrestees interviewed reported that they had previously carried a gun, with adult male arrestees significantly more likely to do so (75%), compared to adult females and juveniles (Figure 5). Also worth noting, those individuals who reported ever carrying a gun were significantly more likely to report they dealt drugs after becoming involved in the gang (58%), compared to those who had never carried a gun (17%). When asked how they had obtained the gun, the most frequent response was through a friend or other gang member (58%), followed by that they had bought it from someone off the street (29%), gotten it from a family member (7%), or purchased it from a store (4%). In addition, 12 percent described other ways, which included “finding it” or stealing it from someone (not shown).

Figure 5
ADULT MALES MOST LIKELY TO REPORT EVER CARRYING A GUN

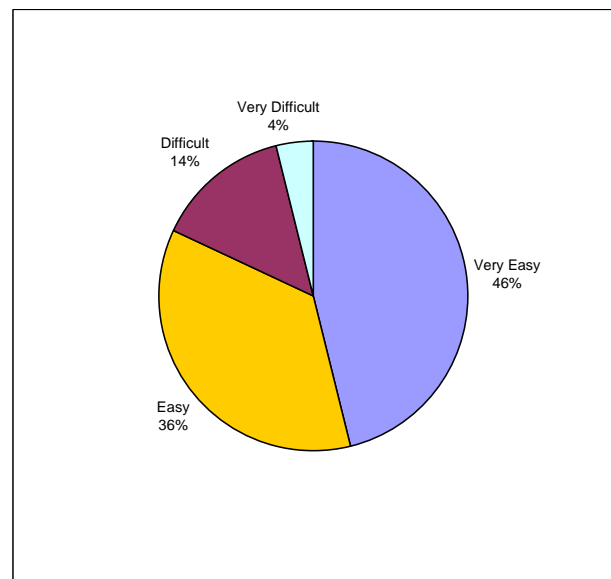


NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

When individuals who had ever carried a gun were asked how difficult it was to obtain one, around four in five said “very easy” or “easy” (Figure 6), with adults significantly more likely to report it was “very easy” compared to juveniles (57% versus 23%) (not shown).

Figure 6
MOST GANG-AFFILIATED ARRESTEES WHO HAVE CARRIED A GUN REPORT IT IS EASY OR VERY EASY TO GET ONE



TOTAL = 80

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

Do Any of Those With Current Affiliations Want to Leave This Lifestyle?

According to the research conducted by Thornberry and his colleagues, the majority of gang participation is limited to one year or less, with most gang members ending their affiliation voluntarily at some point in time. For this interview, arrestees who reported current affiliation with a gang were asked if they wanted to end it. Around one in three (31%) said they did. However, more than one-quarter (30%) of these 27 individuals said that even though they wanted to, they felt they could not leave for a variety of reasons, including that they would fear reprisals from fellow gang members (6 of the 8 respondents) or other gang members (4), and that

they are tied to the gang through their family (3). In another question regarding if they ever envisioned the affiliation ending (perhaps not now, but eventually), 71 percent of the respondents said yes – which included 23 of the 27 individuals who expressed an interest in leaving now, as well as 36 other individuals (not shown).

How do These Individuals Differ From Non-Gang Affiliated Individuals?

Tables 5 and 6 present comparisons for the adult and juvenile arrestees who completed a gang addendum and those who did not. Some significant differences worth noting include:

- For adults, Black individuals represented a greater proportion of the gang-affiliated group, while for the juveniles, Blacks represented a smaller proportion.
- While there was no difference in gang affiliation for adults who identified as Hispanic, there was for juveniles, with a greater proportion of gang-affiliated youth identifying themselves as Hispanic.
- The current highest offense differed for juvenile arrestees, with gang-affiliated youth more likely to be arrested for an “other” offense, which includes probation violations. There was no similar difference in the highest arrest charge for adult arrestees, but adult gang-affiliated individuals were significantly more likely to have served time in prison.
- While there was almost no significant difference between gang-affiliated and non-gang affiliated individuals in terms of the drug test results, there was in self-reported history, with those adults and juveniles with gang affiliations more likely to report drug use (ever and in the past 30 days), compared to those without these affiliations.

**Table 5
ADULT ARRESTEES REPORTING GANG AFFILIATIONS DIFFER FROM THOSE WHO DO NOT ON SEVERAL DIMENSIONS**

| | Gang Affiliation | No Gang Affiliation |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| <i>Demographics</i> | | |
| White | 24% | 39% |
| Black | 40% | 20% |
| Married | 11% | 21% |
| Ever homeless | 56% | 42% |
| <i>Justice System</i> | | |
| Ever prison | 37% | 19% |
| Ever pimped | 11% | 3% |
| <i>Substance Use</i> | | |
| Ever tobacco | 73% | 62% |
| Ever marijuana | 97% | 78% |
| Ever meth | 60% | 44% |
| Ever cocaine | 53% | 40% |
| Ever crack | 37% | 24% |
| Ever prescription drugs illegally | 56% | 34% |
| Ever other drugs | 63% | 37% |
| Marijuana past 30 days | 56% | 36% |
| Meth past 30 days | 39% | 21% |
| Cocaine past 30 days | 12% | 5% |
| Positive multiple drugs | 23% | 14% |
| TOTAL | 90 | 656-661 |

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

Table 6
JUVENILE ARRESTEES REPORTING GANG
AFFILIATIONS DIFFER FROM THOSE WHO DO
NOT ON SEVERAL DIMENSIONS

| | Gang Affiliation | No Gang Affiliation |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <i>Demographics</i> | | |
| White | 13% | 28% |
| Black | 26% | 43% |
| Hispanic | 59% | 28% |
| <i>Justice System</i> | | |
| Current property offense | 8% | 24% |
| Current status offense | 10% | 18% |
| Current other offense | 48% | 20% |
| Siblings in juvenile hall | 51% | 32% |
| <i>Substance Use</i> | | |
| Ever alcohol | 94% | 80% |
| Ever binge alcohol | 81% | 61% |
| Ever tobacco | 83% | 65% |
| Ever marijuana | 94% | 77% |
| Ever meth | 35% | 11% |
| Ever cocaine | 37% | 18% |
| Ever crack | | |
| Ever prescription Drugs illegally | 35% | 18% |
| Ever other drugs | 27% | 12% |
| Binge alcohol past 30 days | 49% | 27% |
| Tobacco past 30 days | 70% | 42% |
| Meth past 30 days | 16% | 4% |
| TOTAL | 51-63 | 73-84 |

NOTE: Cases with missing information not included.

SOURCE: SANDAG SAM Program, 2008

Summary

In 2008, the Criminal Justice Research Division of SANDAG implemented an addendum to the adult and juvenile Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) survey conducted with arrestees in San Diego County. The purpose of this addendum was to capture additional insights that would be useful to local practitioners and policy makers regarding gangs in the San Diego region.

The results of these interviews revealed that current gang affiliation (either membership or association) was more common for juveniles than adults, even though adults comprised over half (59%) of those who completed the addendum. The most common reason for affiliating with the gang initially related to peers who were doing so or family who were involved in the gang lifestyle, although it appears that many family members were active in different gangs, not necessarily the same one as the respondent. Gang members reported they first began their affiliation with the gang around the age of 13 on average, that initiation commonly involved violent acts, and that many perceived the gang would also offer protection to them and to a lesser degree, their families and neighborhood. Once in the gang, individuals reported participating in both legal and illegal activities, although it was clear that there was an increase in criminal activities, including using and dealing drugs and carrying a gun. Consistent with prior research, most of those interviewed either reported they had already stopped associating with the gang or anticipated that they would at some point.

While this information should be interpreted while acknowledging obvious limitations (e.g., self-report nature of the information, including that the nature of the gang relationship was self-defined), it is consistent with other research in the field and speaks to the need for comprehensive strategies to address gang involvement that include prevention, and intervention, as well as suppression.

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